

THE ART OF ACTING.

Since the time of Louis Philippe, when Lacenaire acted at the Court of Assize in his own drama, there had not been such a spectacle to bear away the bell. The author, Pranzini; the leading player, M. le Président Onfroy de Bréville; the audience, Clémenceau among politicians, Rochefort among journalists, Clovis Hugues among poets, la Marquise d'Avaray among ladies of the world, Mounet-Sully and Rachel Boyer among comedians. The author, a man of experience who had lived his work; the play a melodrama as moral as the latest one by Xavier de Montépin, as realistic as Zola's; the leading player a man of wit, starring it to make a mark. It was a success. There never was so much applause at the Institute. The Théâtre Français could not have drawn so many Parisians in midsummer, to a lyric by Banville, even though it was on the eve of the anniversary of the day when the Governor of the Bastille's head was cut off by a patriotic cook with a penknife.

At Notre Dame, long after the invention of printing, the faithful had not ceased to celebrate in the month of January in every year the festival following the pious legend that made of the donkey *ex vi termini* an ass. A young girl, carrying a baby in her arms, rode on a donkey at the head of a long procession formed by the Notre Dame Chapter and the guilds of the city, through the streets into the cathedral, where they took a place by the Book of Gospels in the choir, and the mass was sung with a refrain to imitate the braying of an ass, and the priest, instead of singing "Ite missa est," said "He! hong! he! hong!" At the origin the mania for the stage was in the clergy; now it is in the laity. Between M. le Président at the Pranzini trial and the jack in office at a farce there is but a step; it shall pass unnoticed because to tread the boards and to look for nothing but "bread and plays" is the fad of the day.

For a great nation, especially a nation in peril, it is a pity. The fault is not with the pagan philosophers who with the Christian moralists have passed sentence upon the stage, nor with the men of letters who do not call dramatic literature literature, nor with artists who know that the art of acting is the shadow of a shade. To fancy that there is something highly respectable in the calling of a comedian is to be unsophisticated indeed. Still, the comedian is a personage; he has views, and newspapers and magazines to print them; he has his entrances in real courts and parlors; his little affairs are town talk. The comedian is lord of the ascendant. In former times the critic went to the playhouse to criticize the play, now his duty is to criticize the players, "the play is not the thing." In the newspapers of Paris there is a *lundiste* who writes a long review of the play and players on Monday; a *critique-express* who writes his views of the performance within an hour after the curtain has fallen; a *soiriste* who follows on the heels of the *critique-express* to tell of the audience and of every little incident of the first night. Then there are reporters after every player dogging his footsteps. The court calendar now is the green room calendar. In the last century Jean Jacques Rousseau, who was far from being a prig, replied by letter to a query of d'Alembert that comedians could be made respectable folk only by suppressing the stage. In 1765 Mlle. Clairon, who afterward was the Margravine of Bayreuth, led a riot in the Comédie Française, because a certain player named Dubois had not paid his physician's bill, and had begged for the privilege of making oath that he had paid it, thereby exposing himself to the retort that he was precluded by the infamy of his profession from taking an oath in justice. Times change. Napoleon disconcerted his enemies with the famous decree of Moscow, made while the city was in flames, expressive of anxiety for nothing but the welfare of the Théâtre Français. It made the comedian vain, like the donkey in the fable, who took for himself the resolutions addressed to the relics that he carried. Bocage, hissed for playing badly, came to the footlights and asked the audience to apologize. M. Coquelin having been hissed at Bordeaux for his Don César de Bazan has let the world know in *Scribner's Magazine* that Hugo, according to Coquelin, is a mediocre playwright. Then he has spoken ill of Irving, and that England is not declared war is an indication that England is weak and afraid of Gen. Boulanger. The *Saturday Review* expresses the fear that the invasion of the stage into modern English society may cause the dismemberment of the British Empire. It certainly is more to be dreaded than the Goths and Ostrogoths. The world is affected enough; the man who expressed regret that "his friend was not present to hear him raise Cain" by his lamentations at the grave of his wife was unwittingly the Juvenal of his time. Barbey d'Aurevilly calls it "Histrionism," and says: "To have an idea of that one must have observed at a first performance the auditorium of a playhouse, that pandemonium of variety and curiosity! Only one-half of the play is on the stage, but in the hall the women are all actresses, all the men actors. And the thought comes to you of Bossuet's phrase, 'Every spectator is secretly an actor.' * * * Things of the theatre, spirit of the theatre, fashions of the theatre, have fast gnawed the most robust personality of a nation, and the people has become histrionic." And whereas a dwarf has no fear of a giant, Barbey d'Aurevilly is a dramatic critic who attacks the stage in his "feuilletons." He had been a literary critic, but there is not a Parisian journal that cannot dispense with a literary critic, wanting him, if at all, once in a fortnight for one or two columns. An author gives a lifetime to a book that shall be in a penumbra for all the light that is wasted on the hero of an evening at a playhouse. Newspapers are made for the people. And yet of the two personalities, author and comedian, the latter has in him less of the elements of popularity, because his best effects are to be produced by the mimicry of experiences that are treasured up in the heart.

The best hit made on the ancient stage is recorded of a popular tragedian who, having to play the part of a broken-hearted father, appeared with the urn that contained the ashes of his lately deceased son. Talma uttered a cry of grief when the news came of his father's death, and instinctively repeated it to catch its expression and mimic it in a play, and when in agony looked in a looking glass at his face, marked with the shadow of death, and said: "What a pity not to play Tiberius with that face!"

Edmond de Goncourt's novel "La Faustin," with Rachel for a prototype, ends with the "sardonic agony" of her lover—a laugh stealing in the sinister *ricтус* of the last convulsion of life on a human face; a laugh—laughter, that sweet sign on a face of happiness and joy, become a sort of frightful satanic caricature; in fine, the most astounding thing that it could have been the lot of a dramatic artist to see. * * * And unknowingly, from nervous, involuntarily imitation, La Faustin had been led to studied imitation, as for a part, of an effective theatrical agony; and the laugh that she saw on the lips of her lover she tried to find, if it was in reality the one that was on her lips, by turning around and asking the ogre of the old dressing case's greenish looking glass placed behind her. All absorbed in her work of a comedian, La Faustin suddenly heard a frightful ringing of the bell, and at once turned her head from the glass to meet the eyes of the dying man, in whom consciousness had returned as by a miracle. The two servants had entered the room. "Turn out that woman," said the young lord with a voice wherein had been awakened the implacability of the Saxon race. "An artist * * * you are only that * * * a woman incapable of love!" and died.

But "a woman incapable of love" is, according to Sir Oracle, a woman incapable of being a good comedian.

The room is a study and dressing room. On the wall are panoplies, colossal swords of all ages, numerous portraits representing the same face in various costumes, and in their frames, crowns of gold and silver, trophies won at Nice and other cities; there are on an armchair a costume of black velvet and a hat trimmed with feathers; on a renaissance table a volume of Molière, an unbound copy of "La Tour de Nesle;" on a shelf at least 40 pairs of boots of various sizes, but apparently for the same man, as if it was necessary for him to have a foot sometimes large, sometimes small. Seated and alone, "Montferrat," the greatest of great leading men, is suffering from the deepest grief. His face is transformed. He is seated by a dressing table covered with vials, coloring, brushes, cosmetic, pastel crayons, and though moved by real sorrow is busy "making up." He blackens his eyelids, whitens his mouth, draws a bold stroke that makes his lips fall and does not cease to weep and groan. The door is opened to let in a friend, who shouts: "How do you do? What are you doing?" And "Montferrat" swallows a sob and says: "You see, old man, I am making up—my brother is dead."

Pierrot was fat, paupered, and silly when he came to Paris from Italy, and by the power of wit was transformed into the graceful, poetic, gentlemanly valet that Comerre has painted, but in recent years Pierrot has been in bad company; he is a bourgeois, an elector, and Willette, the artist of the Chatnoir, has made his portrait in his progressive state that is not worth the other. Marguerite played Pierrot at Alphonse Daudet's last season. It was the same Pierrot, with his white face and suit and big buttons, but how changed morally! He killed his wife by tickling the bottoms of her feet, and watched the expression of her face and mimicked it, and drank to drown his remorse, for Pierrot has left behind him at a long distance Harlequin and Columbine; Pierrot has to be respected.

A recent case in a police court in Paris was of an actor who had slapped the face of a fault-finding critic. How far are the French from the time a comedian replied to an insult: "We make up for the infamy of our profession by giving you the right to talk to us as you do." The actor at the police court has been a great breaker of hearts, and as there never was too much applause and adulation for him, if his vanity is greater than his talent the stage-struck world is his auxiliary.

Mounet-Sully is the leading man, that is, he plays the parts of a leading man, at the Théâtre Français, and he has made a hit in the elder Dumas's translation of "Hamlet;" that is not as bad a translation as it might have been. The dramatic critics in Paris are quite certain that "Mounet-Sully is Hamlet," and if Mounet-Sully went every day to the trial and watched constantly, as the newspapers say, every expression in the faces of Pranzini and M. le Président, doubtless he has had a good lesson, and the dramatic critics will be able to say at some future time "Mounet-Sully is Pranzini." Then he will be the ideal comedian. But what a denaturalized world this is! DAVID GAMUT.